

# The Boston Globe

OPINION

## On abortion, America is a nation of haves and have-nots

More than a year after Dobbs, the fiction that the United States — all of the United States — values and supports families has been laid bare.

By Vicki Shabo Updated September 4, 2023, 3:01 a.m.



Maine Governor Janet Mills speaks to the media in July prior to signing into law a bill expanding access to abortions later in pregnancy. ROBERT F. BUKATY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“So goes Maine, so goes the nation,” an old adage says. If that were true — if the federal government or every state took action to support and protect women and families — we would be living in a very different country. One that truly values freedom, economic security, and opportunity.

Maine Governor Janet Mills recently [signed](#) legislation creating a statewide paid family and medical leave program and dedicating historic levels of new funding to improve access to high-quality, affordable child care — policies that are proven to support [good health, workforce participation, and economic growth](#). Also in July, Mills [signed legislation strengthening the state’s abortion protections](#).

On Sept. 3, Oregon’s paid leave program, which passed in 2019, will become fully operational and [begin paying benefits](#) to eligible workers. Oregon also has the most protective abortion guarantees in the country and provides other work-family supports.

Maine and Oregon, as well as Massachusetts, are among the 14 [US jurisdictions](#) that have created paid family and medical leave programs and supported abortion access, but many other states are stuck in a different place that constrains families’ choices and opportunities.

This is evidence of the country’s growing fragmentation as a nation of [haves and have-nots](#) when it comes to families. This fragmentation in policy will also lead to fragmentation in outcomes — in child well-being, households’ financial security, and more.

This divide isn’t inevitable.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/09/04/opinion/abortion-family-medical-leave/>

After the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade last year, there was [silver-lining speculation](#) that the United States might finally address hypocritical inconsistencies between family-values rhetoric and the absence of laws, policies, and practices like universal paid parental leave, maternity care, and new investments in child care.

Sadly, the fiction that the United States — *all* of the United States — values and supports families has been laid bare. Federal policy and 50-state baseline protections are woefully lacking. To the extent the United States has become more family friendly since Dobbs, the passage of new laws has largely been concentrated in states that protect the right to abortion. For example, this spring Minnesota [passed protective abortion legislation](#), created new guaranteed access to [paid family and medical leave](#), and passed a new statewide [paid sick and safe days](#) law. Vermont passed [historic child-care funding](#) in 2023, with the Legislature overriding the governor's veto.

In contrast, of the estimated [36 million women](#) who live in the [26 states](#) that restrict or ban (or are seeking to ban) abortion access, [none](#) have state-guaranteed access to paid family and medical leave through a state paid leave program, a fact that has not changed in the past year; the [13 states plus Washington, D.C., that have created paid leave programs](#) also guarantee the right to abortion care.

Millions live in 17 abortion-hostile states that [preempt](#) cities and counties from enacting local paid leave laws while failing to provide paid leave through state law, with [Texas](#) the most recent state to join this group in June 2023. Only one abortion-hostile state (Arizona) is among the [dozen-plus that guarantee paid sick days](#). And while postpartum care for up to 12 months through Medicaid is [more widely available](#) now than when Dobbs was decided, three states that currently or will likely [soon](#) restrict or ban abortion (Arkansas, Iowa, and Idaho) also [rejected](#) Medicaid expansion in 2023, and other states put [restrictions and limitations](#) on extended postpartum access to Medicaid.

A few antiabortion legislatures have given a nod to family friendly policies. But their solutions are not to scale. For example, [North Carolina](#), [South Dakota](#), and [Texas](#) enacted or adopted paid parental leave policies — but only for state workers, who comprise a fraction of the civilian workforce, rather than for all workers. North Carolina also included [enhanced child-care subsidies](#) as part of its 12-week abortion ban but failed to address the broader need to stabilize the child-care industry.

This fragmentation is a choice that policy makers in Congress and state houses have made — and it [comes at a cost](#) to women, states' competitiveness and ability to attract workers, as well as costs to families and communities that are expected to live and thrive without support.

It's essential for Congress to pass federal-level paid leave and child-care policies that meet the scale of need as well as to guarantee access to abortion care. In Congress, there's new attention and enthusiasm among bipartisan groups of House members on both [paid leave](#) and [child care](#). And there are crises to avert: Without bipartisan action, [federal child-care assistance stabilization funding](#) established during the COVID-19 pandemic will expire on Sept. 30 — with some of the biggest impacts in states that ban or restrict abortion and do little or nothing to support families. These could all be catalysts of action, if politicians can muster the political will and voters demand more.

We are one country, and equal access to care — as well as the freedom to decide whether and when to have a child — should be available to all.

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